DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 920 PS 030 946

AUTHOR	Kreider, Holly
TITLE	Getting Parents "Ready" for Kindergarten: The Role of Early Childhood Education.
INSTITUTION	Harvard Family Research Project, Cambridge, MA.
PUB DATE	2002-04-00
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/fine/resources/research/kreider.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	*Early Childhood Education; Kindergarten; Literature Reviews; *Parent Participation; Parent Student Relationship; *Student Adjustment
IDENTIFIERS	*Transitional Activities

ABSTRACT

This research brief presents preliminary evidence that family involvement in young children's education may contribute to a smooth transition to elementary school not only for children, but also for parents, by helping to prepare them for later involvement in their children's learning. The brief draws from the literature on transition, recent findings from the School Transition Study at the Harvard Family Research Project, and recommended practices from early childhood professionals. (Contains 10 references.) (EV)

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Harvard Family Research Project

Getting Parents "Ready" for Kindergarten: The Role of Early Childhood Education

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April 2002

PS 030946

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When families are involved in their children's early childhood education, children may experience greater success once they enter elementary school (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). We define educational involvement of families as activities that parents conduct at home and in early childhood settings to directly or indirectly support their children's learning. These activities can be conducted individually or through parent peer networks. This research brief presents preliminary evidence that family involvement in young children's education may contribute not only to a smooth transition to elementary school for children, but also for parents, by helping to prepare them for later involvement in their children's learning. This brief draws from the literature on transition, recent findings from the School Transition Study at the Harvard Family Research Project, and recommended practices from early childhood professionals.

Does early childhood education "ready" parents for involvement in their children's school?

Research suggests that family involvement in education can boost young children's academic success (e.g., Henderson & Berla, 1994; Izzo et al., 1999; Marcon, 1999; Powell, 1989). Research also suggests that the transition between early childhood and elementary school can be a crucial period in children's development (Pianta, Rimm-Kauffman & Cox 1999). Yet less is known about the experience of kindergarten transition from parents' perspective (for an exception, see Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999) and the ways that children's early childhood education might promote their parents' involvement throughout children's schooling.

A review of early childhood education and intervention literature suggests that these experiences can affect parents' current and future beliefs and practices (Barnard, 2001). Compared to non-preschool parents, parents of children who participated in preschool activities had higher occupational aspirations for their children, more satisfaction with their children's school performance, and greater parent involvement in elementary years at home and in school. Preschool factors positively affecting later home and school involvement include the existence, amount, and number of years of preschool, as well as follow-on activities once children reach school age.

Yet in her review, Barnard also found studies suggesting that early interventions could lead to less home-school communication and involvement later on. Given the importance of this topic for children's later success, and the mixed results of prior research, we set out to explore connections between early childhood education experiences and later family involvement in education. For a full review of transition literature, see Little & Bohan-Baker (2002).

How do early childhood programs shape parent involvement in kindergarten?

We began with the hypothesis that parents' positive experiences with early childhood programs could help prepare them for connecting with their children's elementary schools. We asked: Is there a relationship between children's attendance at early childhood programs and their parents' involvement with the school once their children enter kindergarten? Do parents' evaluations of these early childhood education experiences affect their later educational involvement?

We interviewed over 200 low-income and ethnically diverse parents whose children were in kindergarten in 1995-1996[1]. The parents were mostly mothers and were spread across two urban and one rural site in the U.S. About half participated in the Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP), a national early intervention program that offered a menu of family support services such as child care, financial assistance, referrals, a family center, family social activities, and parenting education. Findings begin to confirm our initial hypothesis:

- *Parents read a lot more to their children.* Parents whose children attend any preschool or child care setting are ten times more likely to read to their children everyday than parents of children with no early childhood group experience (Chi square = 11.3, $p<.001$, $n=211$).

- *Parents are more likely to visit their child's kindergarten classroom.* Compared to a control group, parents whose children attended CCDP were significantly more likely to visit their child's classroom during the kindergarten year ($t=2.67$, $p=<.01$).

- *Parents may network more with other school parents.* Research suggests that strong peer networks with other parents in the school community may be linked to parents' level of involvement with and information about the school (Lareau, 1987). In our study, parents whose children participated in preschool or Head Start report knowing significantly more parents in their child's kindergarten classroom than parents whose children did not attend any early childhood care, or attended day care (nursery, family day care, or center-based daycare) (Chi Square = 21.1, $p<.05$).

These initial findings suggest that early childhood programs may help set the stage for strong partnerships across families and between families and schools. Below, a qualitative analysis of parent voices adds to our understanding.

What are parents' perspectives on transition?

A subset of parents were asked about their feelings, experiences, and involvement practices related to their children's entry into kindergarten. Here we share the views of 23 parents, all of whom had their children in an early childhood education or care setting. Specifically, a third reported that their children had been placed in child care centers, a third in preschool settings, and one in family care. Length of stay averaged just over one and a half years. About half also participated in CCDP. While this analysis does not allow for a comparison with the experiences of parents whose children did not attend early childhood settings, it does begin to provide links,

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[1] Data come from the School Transition Study (STS), which is supported by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood, with supplementary funds from the W.T. Grant Foundation. Co-principal investigators for this study are Heather Weiss and Deborah Stipek. Other steering committee members are Jennifer Greene, Penny Hauser-Cram, Jacque Eccles, and Walter Secada. Case study data collected on a subset of STS participants were collected and initially analyzed by Kim Friedman, Carol McAllister, Jane Dirks, Jane Wellenkamp, and Gisella Hanley. Quantitative analyses were conducted by Rebecca Hencke and Eric Dearing. Qualitative analyses were in part conducted by Ellen Mayer and Peggy Vaughan.

from parents' perspectives, between involvement in early childhood education and elementary school.

Parents express a range of emotions about their child starting kindergarten

Parents expressed three main feelings: happiness, sadness, and worry. Parents' happiness was often tied to their child's excitement about school. Parents' feelings also colored their conceptions of their child as a learner, much of which developed through their early childhood education experiences. One mother says, "I was excited … I knew she was ready to start kindergarten because … she was in preschool and the preschool teachers told me she'd do well in kindergarten."

Recognizing their child as smart, curious, or able to interact well with other children, parents happily saw kindergarten as another opportunity for their child to flourish as a learner. This was especially true if the parents felt confidence in the quality of the teacher and the school. As one parent explained, "He is so smart. He learned a lot [at preschool for two years]. And I was happy he got to go all day, because he really likes school." Parents also felt excitement about kindergarten as an opportunity for social development for their child—meeting new children, seeing old friends, in such as way that their child's "little life will expand" beyond their interactions in the home and community.

Parents' sadness related more to their own identity as a parent. They would be separated from and missing their child, who would be "leaving the nest," as one parent put it. Public school in particular symbolized a right of passage from young childhood into another phase of childhood for many parents, in a way that early childhood education had not. "I felt sad, because my little boy was growing up." Separation sadness was sometimes mediated by other younger children in the household, such as babies who provided a distraction from that separation. Early childhood education experiences also mediated this feeling, by providing earlier separation experiences. "Since she went to pre-kindergarten, I was already used to being separated from her."

Parents' worried mostly about children's social relationships and vulnerabilities. Parents deduced these vulnerabilities in part from early childhood experiences. One parent explains, "I was scared, because when he's at a new place and doesn't know the people, he's very shy."

Parents have limited but positive contacts with the school prior to its start

Research suggests that parents' involvement in school depends in part on how welcome they feel by the school (e.g., U. S. Department of Education, 1997). Early opportunities to visit the school and speak with the teacher may determine how welcome parents feel.

Yet several parents had no contact with their child's teacher nor visits to the school prior to the start of kindergarten. It is unclear how much of this absence was related to lack of opportunities afforded by the school. Several others mentioned visiting the school on the first day of class, but not before. Among those who did visit ahead of time, their reasons varied from a routine meeting, paperwork, or child testing. School-based preschool programs offered another occasion to visit and be familiar with a school. Finally, other relatives, such as siblings or the parent, may

have attended the school or held a job at the school, familiarizing the parent with the school and possibly the teacher.

Many parents mentioned their desire to know their child's teacher, had positive experiences at the school and with the teacher, and had lasting impressions based on first visits. These visits helped them get a realistic picture of their child's school and his or her place in it. "I feel good because this way I know where she is and what she is going to be doing." One grandmother appreciated an assessment in advance of the start of school, which let her know where her child "was" academically.

Parents report many transition benefits from early intervention experiences

The eleven parents who participated in CCDP all described it as helpful to themselves and their families. Several parents felt the program helped them *know more about their child as a learner*, their strengths, and weaknesses, and their developmental level. Child testing and evaluations were specifically helpful in providing this information, but reassurances from providers also gave parents a reference point for making normative comparisons of their child to others. "Before she started school … I was always wondering if she was at her age level."

This information also *helped parents support their children's learning at home* once they entered school. Parents got specific ideas for learning activities to do with their children by observing home visitors and the activities they conducted, direct suggestions from providers, and other center activities. "Just the simplest things that I would never think of." One parent, who attended many center-sponsored field trips with her children, later used these experiences as a model for interacting with her children. She explained that the center field trips helped promote bonding between herself and her children and sparked her children's interest in learning. So she planned her own "field trips" into the community with her children once they aged out of the program.

Parents also appreciated having someone to help them *solve a wide array of problems*. These problems ranged from practical issues of transportation, housing, employment, and child care, to personal and parenting difficulties. Providers did not always solve these difficulties directly, but rather referred parents to other resources in the community. What was important to parents was the constant willingness of staff to help, advise, and give suggestions. "They were always there to show me that there was a solution to any problem."

Parents appreciated *trusting and lasting connections*. *Trusting* connections meant providers showed faith and confidence in the parent. One parent credits the program with "teach[ing] me that there are people out there that do care." Parents valued providers who gave emotional support, and listened to parents in personal crises (e.g., eating disorders, alcohol addiction, and recovery). "They've been there for me like nobody else have ever been there for me, not even my own family … without the program, I don't think I would have ever made it this far."

Lasting connections meant a lengthy stay in the program and continuity beyond the program. Two parents describe not fully making use of services until they had been in the program for several years, either because it was not convenient or because they were not motivated. Both very much appreciated the program after that point, and even felt hurt when the program ended, characterizing it as having "kicked" them out of the program (when their child went to school).

A few parents were able to maintain connection to the program through employment, friendships, or affiliated school-age services (i.e., an after school program).

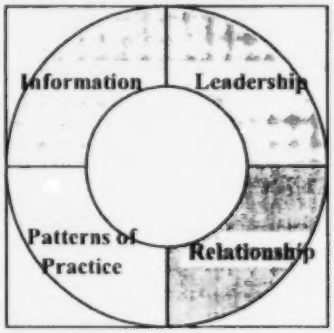
Parents also appreciated *leadership and learning opportunities*. In addition to helping parents locate jobs or pursue education, programs provided opportunities for parents to serve on a parent council, speak to funders about the worthiness of the program, and offer informal help to children and new families in the program. Several parents felt empowered by their expanded roles: "They taught us many things—in what I could do to help myself." Another said, "I was there more than I was at home … but I was learning things. As long as I was learning … I had no problem with it."

Parent processes across the transition

These findings suggest that parents have strong feelings about their children's transition to school, may have few contacts with the school prior to its start, and value their own experiences of involvement in their children's early childhood programs. Each of these findings may in turn lead to parents' involvement practices in kindergarten. They also suggest three important *processes* by which parents become involved in their children's kindergarten, those that build forms of confidence, skill, knowledge, and connection essential to family involvement in education (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Processes that "ready" parents for involvement in kindergarten

- *Information and guidance* give parents knowledge in how to help their child.
- *Leadership opportunities* give parents a sense of efficacy about getting involved.
- *Patterns of practice* established early give parents skills for later involvement.
- *Trusting relationships* help parents connect with other educators later on.



1. A sense of efficacy among parents can be built through exposure to *leadership and learning* opportunities in early childhood settings; a confidence which may carry over into school involvement. For example, one mother who was highly involved in an early childhood intervention program went on to work in a family center at her child's school, helping other parents, and relating comfortably as a paraprofessional to her child's teacher. She felt at ease "dropping by" her daughter's classroom to observe math instruction and tailor her at-home help with her daughter to match the classroom techniques. One mother who was very involved in leadership in her early intervention program said, "They started pullin' things out of me that I didn't know I had within myself."

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2. A set of skills and routines conducive to later involvement in school may be built through *strong patterns of involvement practice* established during early childhood programs. One mother who volunteered frequently during her child's preschool later volunteered a lot in elementary school, saying, "you learn every time you do it." Another frequent parent volunteer in preschool wished she could continue volunteering when her children entered school, but her job and work hours prevented it, suggesting that skills must be matched by positive school and work conditions.

3. Ideas and knowledge, such as about the importance of family involvement to children's school success, can be imparted through the provision of *information and guidance* to parents during their children's early years.

4. Comfort and skills communicating with educators and educational systems can be fostered among parents through meaningful and lasting *relationships* with early childhood professionals, such that relationships with later educators might be facilitated.

How can programs and schools support parent involvement processes?

To prevent fadeout of family involvement in kindergarten and the elementary grades, both early childhood programs and schools have to provide mechanisms for continuous family involvement. We asked a group of practitioners to respond to our research findings with their own best practices for supporting parents' continued involvement in their children's learning. Early childhood education professionals and a few kindergarten teachers who participated in an annual conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in Anaheim, California on November 3, 2001, offered these ideas:

- Host a wide array of *special events* prior to the start of kindergarten at an early childhood setting—such as Spring Teas, picnics, and Kindergarten Fairs. These transition-focused gatherings often have school staff, such as teachers, principals, PTA representatives, and parent liaisons present to meet parents and answer parents' questions. Schools offer similar kindergarten orientations.

- Make use of *routine meetings and materials*, such as parent-teacher conferences, newsletters, and bulletin boards, to convey information about the child's academic and social readiness, the schools and teachers, registration dates, and other information.

- Create portfolios, memory books, and other *concrete collections* of children's experiences to document children's strengths and weaknesses for parents, as well as to assist in their sense of closure from the program.

- Encourage *peer networking* among parents, creating buddy lists and opportunities for parents to meet others who have same-age children entering the same school, or who have already been through the transition experience with an older child.

- Offer *reassurance to parents* regarding their parenting abilities and the normalcy of their anxious feelings about their child's transition into school.

- *Personalize the school and teacher* in a variety of ways, by posting photographs of the classrooms and kindergarten teachers, by having kindergarten children make invitations for preschoolers to visit their class in advance, or by sharing information about specific teachers' styles.

These suggested practices provide information, boost parents' efficacy, create involvement opportunities, and begin to build trusting relationships. Schools and early childhood programs can employ practices like these to respond to parents' feelings of anxiety and excitement, promote their sense of welcomeness and familiarity with schools, provide valuable information about their child and how to support his or her transition, and bolster parents' sense of confidence in themselves as parents and their ability to recognize involvement opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, these suggested practices model collaboration across early childhood programs, schools, communities, and families.

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